Cultural Survival Still a Key Goal

B'nai B'rith Ends Convention

9-12-68

By Martin Weil
Washington Post Staff Writer

B'nai B'rith, the world's largest and oldest Jewish service organization completed its 125th anniversary convention here yesterday, still very much concerned with the problem of Jewish survival.

However, the emphasis has shifted, many members and officials say, from physical survival to cultural survival.

"We spend a great deal of our energy making Jews Jews," said Rabbi Jay Kaufman, executive vice president of the 531,000-member international organization.

The long-range goal of the organization, he said, is to encourage Jews to live by the basic philosophy and ideals of Judaism, "to survive for justice, equality and peace. A big order."

Gradual Approach

B'nai B'rith, however, is a mass organization, which attempts to approach the long-range goals by slow and gradual stages, he said.

"We're a Jewish smorgasbord," he said. "You can find ways to work for Jewish goals in so many areas."

B'nai B'rith engages in charitable work in hospitals and in behalf of veterans. It provides support for the state of Israel, and is active in promoting Jewish youth organizations. It sponsors Jewish study and religious groups at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

"People grow," Rabbi Kaufman said. "They may come in here because they are interested in bowling—as low an interest as that. Five years later they move on to something else."

In the past a considerable amount of the organization's effort was devoted directly to combatting anti-Semitism. Now the scope of the effort has changed. The organization's Antidefamation League seeks to combat threats to democracy and to other minorities, which by their nature are indirect threats to Jews, Rabbi Kaufman said.

Some Have Doubts

And, although "it would appear Jews in America have made it, there are those of us who strongly believe it is a transitory situation," said Eugene Sugarman, of New York, international treasurer of B'nai B'rith.

Pointing out that Jews in Hitler's Germany also felt that they were perfectly secure, he suggested that their complacency led to their downfall.

However, he continued, "I feel strongly that B'nai B'rith belongs in the forefront of the fight to achieve for other minorities, particularly the Negro, the same kind of equality that the Jew has begun to enjoy."

And, he emphasized, "it has to be more than words."

Rabbi Benjamin M. Kahn emphasized the value of cultural pluralism, with many different traditions surviving side by side, each contributing to the whole without being submerged.

Not Just Sentiment

And he explained "there is more than just sentimental attachment," to a 5000-year-old religious and cultural tradition.

Members said they joined to support Israel, to help educate their children in the Jewish tradition and to continue B'nai B'rith's philanthropies.

Among them was J. D. Roberts, 67, from Okmulgee, Okla., who said he joined in part because "they do a lot of good work . . . Jews go for the underdog. We know what it's like."